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SUBJECT: COLOM CONTEMPLATES INCREASING SIZE OF MILITARY

REF: GUATEMALA 1299

Classified By: Lance Hegerle for reasons 1.4(b,d)

¶1. (U) Summary: On September 1, President Alvaro Colom presented a plan to increase the size of the Guatemalan military from an estimated strength of 15,500 to 25,000. He stated that the increase was necessary to reinforce the borders, combat narcotics trafficking, and to respond to the many mayors who have been asking for military deployments to help increase security. Colom and Vice President Espada have in the past made similar comments about the need to increase the size of the standing army, but this was the first time these comments were accompanied by a plan for the increase. Colom has called for an 89 percent increase in military funding over the 2009 budget proposal now before Congress. Colom has also asked for a substantial increase in the police budget in order to address security concerns (SEPTEL). However, he has yet to address how he plans to fund these increases and has not sent a budget increase request to Congress. End Summary.

Colom announces support for military increase

¶2. (U) On September 1, during a celebration of the 135th anniversary of the Military Academy, President Alvaro Colom presented a plan to increase the size of the Guatemalan military from an estimated strength of 15,500 to 25,000 troops. According to Colom the increase was needed to reinforce the nation's borders, and to combat the growing influence of narcotics trafficking organizations. He also justified the increase by stating that he needed to respond to 81 mayors across the country who continue to ask for the deployment of military forces in their towns to participate in joint patrolling with the Police. Colom and Vice President Espada have in the past made similar comments about the need to increase the size of the standing army, but the recent comments for the first time were accompanied by a detailed plan. According to the numbers released to the press, the armed forces would be increased by 5,000 personnel in 2009, and a further 4,500 in 2010. The plan calls for increases among most categories of military personnel, but by far the largest increase would be in the number of enlisted infantry soldiers. Colom has couched the proposed augmentation as an effort to bring the size of the military up to the numbers agreed upon under the 1996 Peace Accords, but has not addressed the question of how the increase would be funded.

Funding the proposed increase?

¶3. (SBU) Despite Colom's comments about a military build-up, the current 2009 budget proposal indicates a 4.3 percent decrease for the MOD from the 2008 budget allocation. On September 29, Colom met with Congressional leadership to

discuss increasing the MOD's 2009 budget allocation, and called for USD 304 million in additional funding for the MOD as part of a broader increase in funding for security. The proposal represents a 89 percent increase in the MOD's budget, but there has been no indication of how the budget increase would be funded. The budget currently before Congress would rely on Congressional approval of the GOG's tax reform proposals, which is now in doubt. Thus far, Colom has not addressed how he would fund the proposed increases and has not officially presented them to Congress.

14. (C) The Office Manager for the military's Budget and Finance Office, Lieutenant Colonel Alvaro Garcia Garcia, told QFinance Office, Lieutenant Colonel Alvaro Garcia Garcia, told PolMil Officer that the proposed 2009 budget decrease was only part of the funding problem facing the MOD. He added that over 90 percent of the MOD's annual budget goes toward salaries and retirement payments, leaving little funding for essential supplies or modernization. He stated that ex-President Oscar Berger proposed addressing the need for modernization four years ago by introducing a four-year military modernization plan that called for the MOD to receive an additional 0.10 percent of Guatemala's GDP earmarked specifically for modernization efforts. Garcia claims that not only did the MOD never receive this additional funding, but that as the GOG did not propose renewal of the program, even the promise of funding for modernization efforts is gone. He stated that problems stemming from the MOD's small budget allocations are exacerbated by the common GOG practice of re-allocating funds between ministries. He asserted that the MOD was generally only able to expend less than 90 percent of its congressionally approved budget. According to the most recent data available, the MOD expended only 80 percent of its 2005 budget and 89 percent of its 2006 budget, which indicates that actual GOG expenditures on defense were below 0.33 percent of GDP.

Shrinking size of the military and the 1996 Peace Accords

15. (U) The terms of the 1996 Peace Accords called for a 33 percent reduction in the size of the Armed Forces from 1995 staffing levels by 1997. The Peace Accords also called for the MOD's budget to be reduced to 0.60 percent of Guatemala's GDP by fiscal year 1999. Official figures listed the total size of the Armed Forces in 1997 at just over 46,900, which made the agreed upon target 31,423 personnel. In December 1997 the Armed Forces were cut to 33,600, with an additional reduction in January 1998 bringing the total size of the force to the agreed upon 31,423. In 2004, under ex-President Berger, the Armed Forces were reduced again to their current size of 15,500 personnel, representing a 67 percent force reduction from 1997 force levels. Under Berger, in addition to the force reductions, the annual Defense Ministry budget shrank to a reported 0.33 of GDP.

16. (U) The Peace Accords make no mention of out-year targets for either the size or funding of the military after 1999, but rather state that "the size and resources of the Guatemalan armed forces shall be sufficient to enable them to discharge their function." While the 1996 Peace Accords may not set a legal precedent for current military size and funding, pundits from across the political spectrum continue to use the targets established under the accords to frame the debate over the size of the military. For example, in a recent radio debate the MOD's spokesperson, Jorge Ortega, argued that the troop increase was necessary to bring the military up to the numbers agreed to under the 1996 Peace Accords. In rebutting Ortega, Alfredo de Leon, a leading member of the leftist Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity Party (UNRG), argued that the MOD's claim that the military had 46,900 personnel in 1997 was greatly inflated, thus making the Peace Accord target smaller than 31,423.

17. (U) Even though the Peace Accords clearly do not speak to current MOD staffing and funding levels, as long as pundits on both sides of the issue continue to use the peace accords

to frame the debate those targets will continue to be relevant to discussions over the size and funding of the Guatemala military. The plan announced by Colom would increase the overall size of the regular Armed Forces to 25,000 in 2010. Debates over the size of the military generally do not include the 3,500 members of the active reserve component that was created in 2004 to participate in joint patrols with the police. However, even if this active reserve component is counted along with the regular Armed Forces, the proposed total would be 28,500, still below the levels envisioned for the immediate future under the 1996 Peace Accords.

Military readiness and modernization

18. (C) Colom's recent remarks focus on increasing the size of the Armed Forces, but of at least equal importance is the need for the GOG to fund modernization efforts. When discussing the MOD's current lack of operational funds the Army Chief of Staff, General Ronald Illescas Garcia, used the MOD's current lack of sufficient stocks of ammunition as an example of the military's general lack of resources. He pointed out that the military-owned munitions factory has been mothballed for five years. He added that military units rarely train with live ammo and that recruits are trained using obsolete, M-1 rifles for which the MOD has a stockpile of ammunition. Illescas stated that this year the MOD wished to produce one million rounds of ammunition, but a company that supplies a key munition input will only ship orders of five million rounds or more. He lamented that the MOD did not have the funds to purchase inputs for five million rounds, and was concerned both that the unused munitions-making machinery would fall into disrepair and that the military's stockpile of ammunition was growing old. Lieutenant Colonel Garcia told PolMil Officer that due to ammunition shortages the average combat soldier was allocated only 20 rounds of training ammo a year, and that recruits fired only 30 rounds during basic training. A lack of sufficient ammunition for training is just one example of a military that is lacking across the board in resources and equipment.

Military expansion plan coming directly from Colom

19. (C) Colom's announcement apparently took most of the military by surprise. The day the story broke Lieutenant Colonel Garcia quipped to PolMil Officer that "he only knew what he read in the paper." He stated that his office was the only entity that could project accurate cost estimates for a military expansion, and that while his office did produce generic annual budget proposals that included possible expansions, he had not been asked to develop a budget proposal matching the current expansion plan. All mid-level embassy contacts within the military expressed equal surprise at Colom's proposal. The Minister of Defense, General Marco Tulio Garcia Franco, told the DATT that he was aware that Colom planned to announce the increase, but was not privy to the exact details as to when the announcement would be made. Illescas stated that the President asked for expansion proposals in March, and that these proposals had probably been the starting point for the President's current plan.

Modernization, border security, or internal security?

110. (SBU) On September 21, Colom again stressed the need to re-open bases in the departments of Peten, Quiche and Izabal to disrupt narcotics trafficking operations. He also acknowledged that 81 mayors had petitioned for joint military-police patrols in their respective municipalities. In contrast, members of the military questioned about a possible increase stressed the need to secure the borders, to combat narcotics traffickers, and to modernize the military, but seldom mentioned the need to increase the joint patrol program. Illescas stated that the expansion was needed to

re-establish military bases closed due to force reductions in the departments of San Marcos, Huehuetenego, Alta Verapaz, Peten, Zacapa, Izabal, and Suchitepequez. While reopening abandoned military bases in border regions would increase security in some outlying areas, the two apparent aims of the proposed staffing increase are not generally compatible. On September 28, Colom reasserted the need to increase the size of the armed forces, but on this occasion added the development of "green battalions" to help guard the country's environmentally protected spaces to the list of possible roles for the additional troops.

¶11. (C) Civil society and human rights groups have publicly criticized Colom's plan to increase military spending. Helen Mack, influential founder of the Myrna Mack Foundation, has called for increased funding for the Government Ministry instead of increased military spending. She claims that an increase in military funding would only serve to further involve the military in internal security missions for which it is ill-suited and constitutionally barred. Although many view the increased use of the military in joint patrols as the only viable option to increase security in rural areas, many civil society leaders view the proposal of increasing the military presence in rural areas as a re-militarization of the countryside. The Myrna Mack Foundation's Coordinator for Security and Military Reform, Felipe Robles, stated privately to PolMil Officer that he recognized the need to increase the size and funding of the military to allow for greater border control and modernization efforts, but that he believed the real reason behind the planned increase was increased joint patrolling, which in his view was not a proper mission for the military. Business leaders view insecurity as a grave problem, but want President Colom to find a fiscally responsible way to pay for it (reftel).

The Military's traditional mission and internal security

¶12. (C) Members of civil society, human rights leaders, and members of the military itself are quick to point out that under the Constitution the military's primary mission is defending border integrity, with a secondary mission of dealing with response to natural disasters. The military's current support role in internal security was ordered by then-President Berger when he created a 3,500 man active reserve component exclusively dedicated to joint patrol operations with the national police. Many senior members of the military have expressed unease with the joint patrol program, pointing out that in addition to not having arrest authority, members of the military are not authorized to use deadly force except in self-defense. A colonel who commands forces that participate in joint patrols told PolMil Officer that this lack of legal mandate for the patrols means his men are operating outside the legal framework and open to prosecution. He stated that on a few occasions his soldiers have been jailed for several months following incidents involving use of lethal force until the judicial system determined that they had acted in self-defense. He added that his instructions to his men are clear, "don't ever fire your weapons, but if you are forced to fire, aim at the aggressor's feet." He added that wounding an aggressor would not result in the incarceration of the soldiers involved while any soldier involved in a shooting resulting in a death would face incarceration pending an investigation. In contrast to the military's involvement in joint patrols, there appears to be little opposition to the military's expanding role in counter-narcotics efforts. The military is careful to couch those efforts in terms of interdiction efforts as a function of border security, and ensures that national police are on hand to make arrests and seizures. In recent narcotics seizures in which military forces played a leading role, the military has been careful to allow civilian authorities to claim credit for the operations.

Comment

¶13. (C) It remains unclear whether the proposed increase would favor the military's goals of modernization and increasing border security, respond to calls for non-traditional military roles such as increased joint patrolling and guarding of environmentally protected places, or end up being a hybrid of these different security goals. One thing that is clear is that without at least some funding for modernization efforts the effectiveness of any additional troops would be greatly limited. This is not the first time that Colom's administration has voiced a desire to increase the size of the military, but such comments in the past have generally been made during addresses to military audiences. As one analyst pointed out to PolMil Officer, "when Colom talks at a school opening he discusses the need for more teachers, but the budget tells the real story." There is no question that the MOD is under-staffed and under-funded, but it remains to be seen whether the planned military increase will be funded in the next fiscal year.

McFarland